Siberian town, once a part of Soviet Gulag, withers after end of Soviet era

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Body

CHERSKY, Russia _ Picture a town inaccessible by road, buried under ice and snow for eight months of the year, unable to support a movie theatre and without enough cars to warrant a traffic light or even a stop sign.

Chersky is the definition of isolation _ or, in Stalinist terms, exile. This forbidding area of northeastern Siberia, where winter temperatures commonly sink to about -50 Celsius, was once part of the Gulag, the network of prisons for the Kremlin's enemies.

The town has shed more than half its population of 12,000 in the hard times that followed the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union. Many of those remaining say they also would leave if they could.

''We have no jobs to offer our people,'' says the mayor, Ivan Suzdalov. The harbour on the Kolyma River, once the gateway for supplies to Siberia's gold mines, had 1,200 workers in Soviet times. Now it employs 62, he said.

Chersky's malaise is common across what Russians call the Extreme North, the frigid zone above the Arctic Circle. At least 2.1 million people, or 18 per cent of the population, have left since 1990, says the Federal Statistics Service. The figure would be even higher but rising prices for oil and other natural resources have been attracting new labour to high-paying jobs.

About 10.5 million still live in the broad band of icebound land stretching across Russia's northern tier from the Finnish border to the Pacific Ocean.

For most, moving south where housing costs are high is not an option.

A law that came into effect Jan. 1 allocates seven billion rubles (C$228 million) in subsidies for buying property in a warmer climate. More than 200,000 people have applied, according to the Russian parliament.

However, critics say the compensation is inadequate and the selection procedures lack transparency. An average family would receive 1.9 million rubles (C$62,000), enough to buy a tiny apartment in a small town, but nothing in Moscow.

Chersky's 5,000 people live on the very frontier of nature. They are 6,600 kilometres and eight time zones away from Moscow, and a 4{-hour flight by a turboprop from the closest city, Yakutsk. To the north is the East Siberian Sea, and all around is frozen tundra, bare mountains, lakes, scrubland and larch forests.

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It is accessible only by air and sea in summer. For a few months in winter, when frozen rivers become roads, trucks make a weeklong journey from Yakutsk to bring essential supplies. A regional airline flies twice-weekly flights from Yakutsk with 30-seat passenger planes. The cargo sits behind the cockpit and spills over into the first rows of seats.

''We don't live here _ we merely survive,'' says Ksenia Grigorova, 25, who works in a kindergarten. ''It's impossible to live here. We need to get away.''

Abandoned buildings give the town a shabby look. Some were deserted when the population shrank. But global warming also has had an impact. The former high school, with a bronze statue of Karl Marx on its doorstep, was vacated two years ago after the ground beneath it thawed so much during summer that the school's walls cracked.

Yet some of Chersky's citizens take pride in the hardships of their Arctic life, and celebrate the stark white beauty of winter and the sudden burst of greenery and wildflowers during the brief summers. Many of them bear the Asian features of people native to northeastern Russia, including indigenous tribes.

Living through water and heating shortages, the Extreme North has been ''thrown away in the rubbish dump of life,'' says Yekaterina Zvyagintseva, 44.

And yet, ''We are happy with what we have. We are people from the north. We have patience,'' she says.

The Soviets encouraged the settling of Siberia's vast spaces to develop mineral resources, to urbanize and ''Sovietize'' the tribes, and to establish a presence during the Cold War standoff with the Western NATO alliance. Russia is nearly twice the size of the U.S. but with less than half the population.

Chersky, named for the 19th century Polish explorer Jan Czerski, was closed to foreigners until 1991. Because of its remoteness and unguarded frontiers, Russia still considers it a military zone where visitors _ even Russian citizens _ need permits to enter.

Josef Stalin's regime sent hundreds of prisoners to the Zelyony Mys port on Chersky's outskirts and to Ambarchik, a nearby labour camp. Local historian Zoya Rubik calls it ''a time that represents the darkest pages of our history.''

It's an era many people prefer to forget. Rubik runs the provincial Nizhnekamsky museum, where just one small room is devoted to the Gulag. More popular are the exhibits of Arctic folklore and relics of the mammoths and wooly rhinoceroses that roamed here during the Ice Age.

Little is known about Ambarchik. Rubik says no archives were kept on the number of prisoners or how many may have died from cold, hunger or hard labour.

One documented horror was a prison uprising in November 1937 when guards executed 49 people, she said. Locals call the execution site Bloody Lake, and still consider it a place of evil. Today, a lone cross stands where the camp stood until it was dismantled following Stalin's death in 1953. The prisoners were transferred or released, and Rubik said some stayed on in the area and raised families.

Living here is not only hard, it's expensive. Bread costs 40 rubles (C$1.30) a loaf, two or three times more than in Moscow. The one-way fare to Yakutsk costs about C$560, more than a month's salary for most workers.

''There's nothing to do here, either for kids or adults. It's only family and work, family and work,'' says Sardana Golubchikova, an education department employee.

Yet young people seem anything but drab and depressed. Teenagers take pride in the stylishness of their dress, wearing anything from heels to hip-hugger jeans. Like Golubchikova, who is 27, women dress fashionably and wear high heels even on icy streets. Everyone has a cellphone.

But the future holds little promise for the youth. ''Very few kids stay here after graduation,'' says school secretary Yelena Kuznetsova. ''Parents are anxious to get them out of here to enrol them in university.''

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Some people look back wistfully to the latter years of Soviet rule, when food was subsidized and salaries high enough for even schoolteachers to escape once a month to Moscow.

"Under the Soviet Union, we always had both meat and fish in the shops," said Anastasia Vinokurova, 65, a bright scarf wrapped around her ears under her fur hat.

Lydia Martynova, 69, used to work in a printing house, but it closed down along with most small enterprises after the Soviet Union was dismantled.

On a winter afternoon, she casts a fishing net through a hole in the ice of the Kolyma River. She grows vegetables in a small greenhouse, raises a few hens and picks summer berries in the forest. But she says her daughter in Yakutsk sends her much of her food.

"Things were much better in the Soviet Union," said Martynova. "We could manage a seaside vacation every year. Now it's probably 15 years I haven't gone anywhere, apart from one time when the health care paid for a trip to Yakutsk. Any trip from here is very expensive."

Associated Press reporters Nataliya Vasilyeva in Moscow and Dmitry Kozlov in Chersky contributed to this report.

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